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ABSTRACT

Collaborative Learning (CL) is a form of instruction in which small groups of students work together on tasks utilizing set structures and specific time limits that are controlled by the teacher. At Erie Community College (ECC) in Buffalo, New York, several structured activities for CL have been developed for use in the classroom. In the "Three Step Interview" technique, students are grouped into pairs. Each student conducts a content-based interview of the other student, and then the pair meets with another pair of students to share what they have learned. In the "Think-Pair-Share" technique, a single question or problem is posed to the class. After formulating individual responses, students form pairs and develop a common response or solution. In the "Roundtable" technique, students form groups with a minimum of three members, then brainstorm to solve a particular problem. In implementing CL, instructors should introduce the new activities slowly, avoid self-selected groupings of students, seek feedback from students, assign roles in each group to ensure participation, prepare tasks for students who finish early, and establish homework partners. Through CL focus groups which meet several times each semester, faculty at ECC share their experiences utilizing CL techniques. To introduce part-time faculty to CL, the New Faculty Orientation program at ECC utilizes CL techniques. As a result of the focus groups and the use of CL approaches in the classroom, a strong sense of community has developed at ECC, both between faculty and among students. (PAA)

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The Chair as Academic Leader

Presented at:
The Second Annual International Conference
for Community College Chairs, Deans,
and other Instructional Leaders

Given By:
Mary Beth Orrange
Chair Mathematics/ Computer Science
Erie Community College, South Campus
Buffalo, New York

February 19, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

When the National Community College Chair Academy notified me that I was to be honored as one of the "Outstanding Community College Chairs who Encourage Teaching Excellence" at the 1993 International Conference for Community College Chairs, Deans and Other Instructional Officers they asked me to give a presentation on the Department Chair as Academic Leader. My colleagues nominated me for this honor partially because of my dual roles as Department Chair and Chair of the Collaborative Learning Focus Group. My focus therefore, will be on the communities we have created on campus through our study and implementation of Collaborative Learning.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES THROUGH COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

There exists a strong spirit of Community on our campus brought about by unique staff development activities. Two types of communities exist: one collegial and one student. The collegial groups are organized through the Teaching Resource Center, a Collaborative Learning Focus Group, and a Classroom Research Focus Group. These focus groups each consist of 15 to 20 faculty, staff and administrators who meet several times a semester to discuss classroom techniques and excellence in teaching.

The second community is fostered by the use of Collaborative Learning in the classroom. The classrooms of those faculty members using Collaborative Learning techniques are turned into unique learning communities.

THE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING FOCUS GROUP

A few years ago several faculty members from our campus attended a workshop on Collaborative Learning techniques given by Barbara Millis from the University of Maryland. We returned to our classes eager to try what we learned. A few weeks later we met to discuss the changes in our classes. We were excited and stimulated by our results. We shared these activities and our findings with the rest of the college by presenting at several staff development days. Since then we have expanded our original group to include others from our campus who are using cooperative learning techniques in their classes. We meet several times a semester over pizza to encourage each other. The discussion centers around classroom techniques, not the weather or the administration. It is enjoyable to routinely meet with colleagues, outside of the traditional committee structure, with the sole purpose of improving the teaching/learning environment.

Recently, we have expanded to form the "Collaborative Learning Consortium of Western New York." Once a semester we invite an outside guest speaker and

welcome faculty from area colleges. This successful endeavor has been well received.

AN OVERVIEW OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative Learning is a form of instruction where small groups of students work together on tasks. These groups are organized utilizing set structures and specific time limits that are controlled by the teacher. Through well defined activities each member of the group functions as part of a team, often in roles such as recorder, checker or reporter. We have found that less formal approaches also work well. We simply have students turn to their neighbor to discuss the solution to a given problem or assign homework partners to foster a sense of belonging. This encourages active learning and fosters involvement. Who has the most fun in class? The one solving the problems - traditionally the teacher. By creating an atmosphere where students think in class, they understand and retain more. We try to utilize the fact that peers are powerful educators.

THREE SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES

Many structured activities have been developed for classroom use. Three of our campus favorites techniques are: Three Step Interview, Think -Pair - Share, and Roundtable.

THREE STEP INTERVIEW is technique used primarily as an ice-breaker or as a background probe. The method is simple, form pairs and have participant "A" interview "B." Then have "B" interview "A." After a set time has passed, have each pair find another pair and share what they have learned about their partner with the others. This technique works best when content based. Otherwise the students view it as a filler and do not value the activity.

THINK - PAIR - SHARE This technique allows everyone to think about a response to a question; therefore, not only the fast thinkers participate. A question is posed, or a problem is presented. Each individual is to formulate their own response, then pair with another to form a common response. After a set time, pair the pairs to form groups of four to develop a common solution. Depending upon the situation, pair a third time or have the groups report to the class. This technique is a favorite on my campus.

ROUNDTABLE is a technique that can be used for brainstorming, background knowledge probing or reviewing. Establish groups with a minimum of three members. Each group uses one pad of paper and one writing utensil. Each person must contribute. Group members take turns writing responses, and they must verbalize their response as they write it. Pass the pad of paper and pen clockwise after each response. Continue around the circle until the time limit is up. Group members are not allowed to skip turns, but coaching from others is allowed.

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION - GETTING STARTED

Through the Focus Group we have shared our classroom experiences with one another. I would like detail some of our findings.

We feel that it is best to start slowly with Cooperative Learning exercises. Try one or two activities the first semester and build on your successes. Keep a folder of what works, and eventually you will have a full bag of tricks. Slowly and deliberately we introduce each new class of students to our techniques.

Frequently students are initially skeptical of working with their peers (especially the non-traditional students). Although some classes require more coaching than others, after a few successful activities this hesitation is eliminated.

Ordinary playing cards work well for grouping students. During the first few weeks form groups randomly and then have students settle into base groups for the rest of the semester. Self-selected groups are the least successful; thus, the instructor should maintain control of the group assignment. Groups of four or five student members work best; this allows for several pair interactions. At this size, the groups remain functional if one or more students drop out or miss a class.

Use classroom research techniques for feedback on new activities to determine the student's perspective.

Activities must be well organized and planned in advance. Plan the materials, the task, and the grading method. Be in control of the time spent on a task. Given a time deadline, students stay focused. Circulate throughout the room for the duration of the class to keep the students working on the assigned task.

To insure that the entire group participates, assign roles such as checker, recorder, presenter, researcher, or interpreter. Build in accountability by randomly selecting the presenter, or by having the students "grade" the other group members. This should foster a spirit of cooperation, not competition.

Shared materials foster communication among group members. Present one copy of the problem to each group, or give each group a different problem set and expect the groups to exchange assigned problem sets.

All groups are not created equal. Prepare extension tasks for the group that finishes early or the group that wants more information.

Establish homework partners. This eliminates beginning class with reviewing the last evening's assignment. Sometimes we use homework as the "think" component of "think - pair - share."

Although we have done no formal studies ourselves, we feel that using these techniques has improved student motivation and increased retention. The teachers participating in our Collaborative Learning Focus Group feel that they have touched their students in a better way and formed a community within their classrooms.

SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY

One of the problems we experience at a community college is the sense of isolation that our students feel. They come to us by ones. They sit in class alone and work alone. When a teacher takes the time and effort to break down the isolation that exists in the classroom, a spirit of community develops. The students begin to care about each other. We find them in study groups in the cafeteria, in the halls, and in our offices. As teachers, we find that we are perceived as more accessible than when we stand at the board and lecture.

A spirit of community has developed among my colleagues. We spend time discussing the teaching/learning environment in a professional manner and make the time to share teaching activities. We are willing to share both our successes and failures with each other in order to help our students learn.

THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR

My role as Chair of the Collaborative Learning Focus Group and my role as Chair

of the Mathematics/Computer Science Department blend together naturally. It enables me to involve the full-time faculty in my department in staff-development activities on my campus. I bring the thoughts of others in the college and in current literature to my department colleagues.

I have developed a library of activities for involving students in their learning process in my discipline and therefore can influence the teaching style of growing numbers of part-time faculty. The only exposure that many of these new and part-time faculty have had to higher education is the lecture method. We include the three techniques; Roundtable, Think-Pair-Share, and the Three Step Interview; in our New Faculty Orientation.

These techniques are useful in situations other than in the classroom. My department recently went through a self-study program review. We successfully used a form of Collaborative Learning to involve the entire department in the development of the document. Additionally, we have used these techniques to obtain a broad base of opinions at administrative retreats and staff development activities.

CONCLUSION

The focus in my classroom has changed from teacher-oriented lectures to student-based problem solving. This same change has taken place in many classrooms on my campus. We have established a successful forum for teachers to openly share their teaching experiences with each other. We have created learning communities within our classrooms where the students care about each other's successes. Repeated use of these simple techniques has improved the quality of the teaching and learning environment at Erie and fostered a spirit of collegiality among my peers.

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The inspiration for encouraging excellence in teaching through Collaborative Learning was given to me and my Erie Community College colleagues by Barbara Millis (University of Maryland University College), Joe Cuseo (Marymont College, California) and through the work of David Johnson, Roger Johnson and Karl Smith (University of Minnesota.) Susan Ballard, The Director of the Teaching Resource Center at Erie Community College/South Campus, originated the idea of Focus Groups. She gives support and encouragement to every teacher at Erie. The Focus Group participants have generated the ideas given in this presentation and my students make me want to continue teaching.